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Apart from 'History of a Business Enterprise' and 'A Visit to Friends', which originally appeared in 1892 and 1898 respectively and are more representative of the later works of the mature Chekhov, the stories collected in this volume were all published between 1882 and 1888, when the author was just at the beginning of his literary career. In tone and content they range from amusing trifles and humorous stories to psychological and tragic pieces, providing a fascinating glimpse into the development of one of the world's most influential storytellers and playwrights.



Anton Chekhov (1860–1904)

*The Woman in the Case*



## *The Woman in the Case*

**S**MYCHKOV, A MUSICIAN, was walking from town to Prince Bibulov's country villa, where, to celebrate an engagement, there was to be an evening of music and dancing. On his back lay an enormous double bass in a leather case. Smychkov was walking along the bank of a river, the cool water of which was running if not majestically, at least extremely romantically.

Shall I have a bathe? he thought.

Without further ado he undressed and plunged his body in the cool current. It was a gorgeous evening. Smychkov's romantic soul was beginning to harmonize with its surroundings. But what a blissful feeling seized his heart when, after swimming along about a hundred paces, he saw a beautiful girl sitting on the steep bank, fishing. He held his breath, overwhelmed by a welter of mixed feelings: reminiscences of childhood, nostalgia for the past, awakening love... Good Heavens, and he had thought that he could no longer love! After he had lost faith in humanity (his wife, whom he had loved passionately, had run away with his friend Sobakin, the bassoon-player), his heart had been filled with a feeling of emptiness, and he had become a misanthrope.

What is life? He had asked himself the question more than once. What do we live for? Life is a myth, a dream... ventriloquy...

But standing before the sleeping beauty (it was not difficult to observe that she was asleep), suddenly, regardless of his will, he felt in his breast something resembling love... He stood before her for a long time, devouring her with his eyes.

But that's enough... he thought, letting out a deep sigh. Farewell, lovely vision! It's time I went to His Highness's ball...

He looked once more at the beauty, and was just about to swim back, when an idea flashed through his mind.

I must leave her something to remember me by! he thought, I'll hitch something onto her line. It'll be a surprise from 'person unknown'.

Smychkov swam quietly to the bank, picked a large bunch of field and water flowers and, tying it up with a bit of pigweed, he hitched it onto the hook.

The bouquet fell to the bottom, and took the pretty float down with it.

Prudence, the laws of nature and my hero's social position demand that the romance should end at this precise point, but – alas! – an author's fate is inexorable: owing to circumstances beyond the author's control the romance did not end with a bouquet. In spite of common sense and the nature of things, the poor and humble double-bass player was to play an important part in the life of the rich and noble beauty.

When he swam to the bank, Smychkov was thunderstruck: he could not see his clothes. They had been stolen... While he had been admiring the beauty, some unknown rascals had carried off everything except the double bass and his top hat.

“Damnation,” exclaimed Smychkov. “Oh men, you generation of vipers! I don't so much resent being deprived of my clothes – for clothes decay – as the thought that I shall have to go stark naked and thus violate social morality.”

He sat down on the double-bass case and tried to find a way out of his awful predicament.

I can't go to Prince Bibulov's with nothing on! he thought. There'll be ladies there! And besides, with my trousers the thieves have taken the rosin which was in them!

He thought for a long time painfully, till his head ached.

Oh! he remembered at last. Not far from the bank, in the bushes, there's a little bridge... I can sit under the bridge until it gets dark, and when night falls I'll creep to the nearest cottage...

Dwelling on this thought, Smychkov put on his top hat, hoisted the double bass on his back, and trudged along to the bushes. Naked, with the musical instrument on his back, he was reminiscent of some ancient, mythical demi-god.

Now, reader, while my hero is sitting under the bridge and giving himself up to sorrow, let us leave him for a time and turn our attention to the girl who was fishing. What happened to her? When the beauty woke up and did not see the float on the water, she hastened to give her rod a jerk. The rod strained, but the hook and float did not appear from under the water. Evidently Smychkov's bouquet had become sodden in the water, had swollen and grown heavy.

Either there's a big fish caught on it, thought the girl, or else the hook has got entangled.

After jerking the rod a bit more, the girl decided that the hook had got entangled.

What a pity! she thought. And they bite so well in the evening. What shall I do?

And without further ado the eccentric girl threw off her diaphanous clothes and plunged her lovely body in the current right up to her marble shoulders. It was not easy to unhook the bouquet, which had become entangled with the line, but patience and labour won the day. After about a quarter of an hour the beauty came out of the water, radiant and happy, holding the hook in her hand.

But she was in the hands of cruel fortune. The scoundrels who had taken Smychkov's clothes had abducted her dress too, leaving her nothing but a jar full of worms.

What shall I do now? she wept. Must I really go about like this? No, never! Death would be better! I'll wait until it gets dark; then, in the darkness I'll get as far as Agafia's and send her home for a dress... And while I'm waiting I'll hide under the bridge.

Choosing a way where the grass was longest, and bending down, my heroine ran to the bridge. When she crawled under the bridge, she saw there a naked man with a musical mane and a hairy chest; she gave a cry and fainted.

Smychkov was frightened too. At first he took the girl for a naiad.

Is this a river siren, come to lure me? he thought, and he found this conjecture tempting, for he had always had a very high opinion of his personal appearance. And if she's not a siren, but a human being, how can this strange transformation be explained? Why is she here, under the bridge? And what is the matter with her?

While he was deciding these questions, the beauty came to.

"Don't kill me!" she whispered. "I am Princess Bibulova. I beseech you! You'll be given a lot of money! I was in the water just now disentangling my hook, and some thieves stole my new dress, shoes and everything!"

"Madam," said Smychkov in an imploring voice, "they stole my clothes too. And what's more, together with my trousers they carried off my rosin, which was in them!"



Usually no double-bass and trombone players have any presence of mind; Smychkov, however, was a pleasant exception.

“Madam,” he said, after a moment. “I see that you are embarrassed by my appearance. But, you will agree, I cannot leave this place for the same reasons as yourself. I’ve got an idea: would you care to lie down in my double-bass case and cover yourself with the lid? That would hide me from you...”

Having said this, Smychkov pulled the double bass out of its case. For a moment it seemed to him that, in handing over the case, he was profaning Sacred Art, but he did not hesitate for long. The beauty lay down in the case and curled herself up in a ball, while he tightened the straps and began to rejoice that Nature had endowed him with such brains.

“Now, madam, you can’t see me,” he said. “Lie there, and don’t worry. When it’s dark I’ll carry you to your parents’ house. I can come back here for the double bass later.”

When darkness fell, Smychkov hoisted the case with the beauty inside it onto his shoulders, and trudged off in the direction of the Bibulovs’ villa. His plan was as follows: to begin with, he would go as far as the first cottage and acquire some clothes, and then go on...

Every cloud has a silver lining... he thought, scattering the dust with his bare feet and bending under his burden. Bibulov will probably reward me handsomely for the warm interest I have taken in the princess’s fate.

“Are you comfortable, madam?” he asked, in the tone of a cavalier gallant inviting a lady to a quadrille. “Please don’t stand on ceremony, and do make yourself absolutely at home in my case!”

Suddenly the gallant Smychkov thought he saw two human figures wrapped in darkness walking ahead of him. On looking more closely, he became convinced that this was not an optical illusion: two figures were, in fact, walking along, and were even carrying some sort of bundles in their hands...

I wonder if those are the thieves? the thought flashed through his mind. They’re carrying something. It’s probably our clothes!

Smychkov put the case down on the road, and started in pursuit of the figures.

“Stop!” he cried. “Stop! Stop thief!”

The figures looked round and, seeing that they were being pursued, took to their heels... For a long time the princess heard rapid footsteps and cries of "Stop!" At last all was silent.

Smychkov was carried away by the chase, and probably the beauty would have had to lie in the field by the road for a good while longer, if it had not been for a happy coincidence. It so happened that at that very time and along that very road Smychkov's friends, Zhuchkov, the flautist, and Razmakhaikin, the clarinetist, were walking to the Bibulovs' villa. They stumbled over the case, both looked at each other, and raised their hands in amazement.

"A double bass!" said Zhuchkov. "Why, it's our Smychkov's double bass! But how did it get here?"

"Probably something happened to Smychkov," decided Razmakhaikin. "Either he got drunk, or else he was robbed. In any case, it wouldn't be right to leave the double bass here. Let's take it with us."

Zhuchkov hoisted the case on his back, and the musicians continued on their way.

"It's the devil of a weight!" the flautist grumbled all the time. "I would not agree to play a monster like this for anything in the world... ugh!"

When they arrived at Prince Bibulov's villa, the musicians put the case down in the place reserved for the orchestra, and went to the bar.

The chandeliers and sconces were already lit in the villa. The fiancé, Lakeych, a handsome and attractive official of the Ministry of Transport, was standing in the middle of the ballroom and, with his hands in his pockets, was chatting with Count Shkalikov. They were talking about music.

"You know, Count," said Lakeych, "in Naples I was personally acquainted with a violinist who really performed miracles. You wouldn't believe it! On the double bass... on an ordinary double bass he produced such devilish trills that it was simply amazing! He played Strauss waltzes!"

"Come now, that's impossible," said the Count sceptically.

"I assure you! He even performed a Liszt rhapsody! I was living in the same hotel as he was and, as I had nothing better to do, he taught me how to play a Liszt rhapsody on the double bass."

"A Liszt rhapsody! Mmm – you're joking..."

"You don't believe me?" laughed Lakeych. "Then I'll prove it to you now! Let's go to the orchestra!"

The fiancé and the Count went off to the orchestra. They went up to the double bass, and began quickly to undo the straps... and – oh, horror!

But there, while the reader, giving his imagination free rein, pictures the outcome of the musical argument, let us turn to Smychkov... The unfortunate musician did not catch up with the thieves, and when he returned to the place where he had left the case, he did not find his valuable burden. Lost in conjecture, he walked up and down the road several times and, not seeing the case, decided that he must be on the wrong road...

This is awful! he thought, tearing his hair, and his blood running cold. She'll suffocate in the case! I'm a murderer!

He walked the roads and searched for the case till midnight, but finally, deadbeat, he went back under the bridge.

I'll have another look at dawn, he decided.

His search at dawn yielded the same result, and Smychkov decided to wait for night under the bridge...

"I'll find her!" he muttered, taking off his top hat and tearing his hair. "I'll find her, if I have to search for a year!"

And still, so the peasants living in those parts say, at night near the bridge a nude man may be seen, overgrown with hair and wearing a top hat. Now and again, from under the bridge, can be heard the rumble of a double bass.

## *Appropriate Measures*

THE SMALL PROVINCIAL TOWN, which, as the local prison superintendent had once put it, could not be distinguished on any map even under a telescope, is lit up by the midday sun. Peace and quiet everywhere. A sanitary commission consisting of the town doctor, the police inspector, two representatives of the town council and one trade deputy is slowly proceeding from the town hall towards the shopping quarter. Constables follow respectfully behind... The way of the commission, like the way to hell, is paved with good intentions. As they walk along gesticulating, the sanitary inspectors discuss uncleanness, stink, appropriate measures and other unsavoury subjects. The discussions are so clever that the police inspector walking in front of the group is suddenly seized with delight, turns round and declares:

“We really should try to meet as often as we can and discuss matters! It’s a pleasure and an entertainment. As it is, all we do is quarrel. We do, really.”

“Whom shall we begin with, Anikita Nikolaych?” asks the trade deputy, addressing himself to the doctor in the tone of an executioner selecting a victim.

“What about starting off with Osheynikov’s shop? Firstly, the man’s a scoundrel, and... secondly, it’s time he was got at. I had some buckwheat from him the other day, and I found rat droppings in it, if you’ll pardon the expression... My wife couldn’t eat it.”

“Well then, we might as well start off with Osheynikov as with anyone else,” says the doctor with complete indifference.

The inspectors walk into a shop labelled “Tea, Sugar, Coffee and other Groceries, A. M. Osheynikov”, and immediately, without further ado, begin their inspection.

“Er... yes...” says the doctor, looking at attractively piled-up pyramids of laundry soap. “Regular Towers of Babel you’ve built here! Very ingenious, I must say! Oh, eh, eh! What’s all this? Just look at him! Look at Demyan Gavrilch cutting soap and bread with the same knife!”

“That won’t give people cholera, Anikita Nikolaych!” says the shopkeeper reasonably.

“That’s true enough, but it’s disgusting all the same! After all, I buy bread here, too.”

“We have a special knife for the better sort of customer. Don’t you worry, sir...”

The police inspector peers short-sightedly at a ham, scratches it for a long time with his nail, smells it loudly, then taps it with his finger and asks:

“You never have these with strichines in, have you?”

“What a thing to say, sir... Come, come now... as if I could!”

The police inspector is overcome with embarrassment, leaves the ham and peers at the price list of Asmolov & Co. The trade deputy puts his hand into a barrel containing buckwheat and feels something soft and velvety... He has a look, and tenderness spreads over his face.

“Pussies... pussies! My little darlings!” he murmurs. “Lying in the buckwheat with their little faces up... all cuddly... Now, Demyan Gavriylch, you might send me just one little kitten!”

“Of course, sir... Well, and here you have the delicatessen counter, in case you want to inspect it... Herrings here... cheese... cured sturgeon this is... The sturgeon I got on Thursday, the best kind... Mishka, give me a knife!”

The sanitary inspectors cut themselves a piece of cured sturgeon each, smell it and taste it.

“I might as well have a snack too, while we’re about it...” says the grocer, Demyan Gavriylch, as if to himself. “I had a little bottle lying about somewhere. Ought to have a drink before eating the sturgeon... Gives it a different taste then... Let’s have the bottle, Mishka.”

Mishka, his cheeks blown out and eyes popping out of his head, uncorks the bottle and puts it on the counter with a resounding bang.

“Drink on an empty stomach...” says the police inspector scratching his head, unable to make up his mind. “However, if we just have one each... Only you be quick, Demyan Gavriylch, you and your vodka; we’re busy!”

A quarter of an hour later the sanitary inspectors, wiping their lips and picking their teeth with matchsticks, make their way to Golorybenko’s shop. As if to spite them, the way here is blocked...

Half a dozen young stalwarts, their faces red and sweaty, are rolling a keg of butter out of the shop.

“Keep to the right!... Pull it by the rim... Go on. Pull, pull! Put a bit of wood underneath... Oh, damn! Get out of the way, sir, we might crush your toes!”

The barrel sticks in the doorway and stops... The young stalwarts strain away at it and push it and pull it with all their might, puffing and snorting noisily and swearing at the top of their voices. After such efforts, in the course of which the air becomes considerably polluted by the puffing and the snorting, the barrel at last rolls out, but for some unknown reason, rolls back again in defiance of all natural laws, and once more sticks in the doorway. The puffing and snorting begins anew.

“Oh, blast!” exclaims the police inspector. “Let’s got to Shibukin. These devils will be puffing away at it all day.”

The sanitary inspectors find Shibukin’s shop locked.

“But it was open!” say the sanitary inspectors, looking at each other in astonishment. “As we were going into Osheinikov’s shop, Shibukin was standing on the threshold and was washing out a copper teapot. Where is he?” they ask a beggar standing near the locked shop.

“Spare a copper for a poor cripple, in the name of God,” wheezes the beggar. “Many thanks to you, gov’nors... bless you and your parents.”

The sanitary inspectors wave him away, and continue on their way, all except the town council representative Plyunin. He gives the beggar a copeck, crosses himself hastily as if afraid of something, and runs off in pursuit of the rest of the company.

About two hours later the commission is wending its way back. The sanitary inspectors look tired and worn out. They have not laboured in vain; a constable strides solemnly along carrying a large tray full of rotten apples.

“Well now, after our righteous labours, a bit of a snifter might not be a bad idea,” says the police inspector, glancing at a signboard: “Wine and vodka cellar”. “We need something to give us back our strength. Er – yes, might do us some good. Let’s go in if you like!”

The sanitary inspectors go down into the cellar and sit down round a table with bent legs. The police inspector nods to the bar-keeper, and a bottle appears on the table.

“Pity one can’t have a snack with it,” says the trade deputy, making a wry face as he empties a glass. “Haven’t you got a little cucumber, or something. However...”

The deputy turns to the constable with the tray, chooses the least spoilt of all the apples and eats it.

“Oh... some of them aren’t all that rotten!” says the police inspector in a seemingly surprised tone of voice. “Let’s have them here. I’ll choose some too! Just put the tray here... The better ones we’ll take out and peel, and you can destroy the others. Anikita Nikolaych, let’s have another drink! We really ought to get together a bit more often and discuss things. As it is, we just live on in these backwoods – no education in these parts, no club, no decent company – might as well be Australia! Come on now, pour out some more! Doctor, have some apples! I’ve peeled them for you with my own fair hands!”

“Where would you like me to put the tray, sir?” the constable asks the police inspector, who is leaving the cellar with the rest of the company.

“Tr-tray? What tray? Oh, I see! Destroy it together with the apples... Because it’s contagious.”

“You have eaten the apples, sir.”

“Oh... excellent! Look... you go over to my house and tell my wife not to be angry... I’ll only go off for an hour or so... to Plyunin’s, to get some sleep... Do you understand? Sleep... in the arms of Morpheus. Tra-la-la.”

And raising his eyes to heaven, the police inspector shakes his head bitterly, spreads out his hands and says:

“And that’s the way our life goes!”

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